

USING BLENDED LEARNING STRATEGIES AT THE UWI: A STUDY OF TWO DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two new innovative programmes in which there is an attempt to incorporate current technology and pedagogical/andragogical approaches to distance learning. We look at how the programmes utilize blended learning strategies in which technologies in addition to audioconferencing and print materials facilitate active interactions suited to the fields of teacher education and gender and development studies.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of blended learning is not new. In the traditional classroom setting, when teachers combine lectures, labs and multimedia presentations they are blending their teaching strategies. The concept has become popular in recent years in relation to the online environment and is particularly common in the corporate world in human resource training. It is also part of the jargon in the educational setting. What is blended learning? According to the *ASTD e-Learning Handbook*, "It is the use of two or more distinct methods of training. This may include combinations such as:

- blending classroom instruction with on-line instruction
- blending on-line instruction with access to a coach or faculty member
- blending simulation with structured courses
- blending on-the-job training with brown bag informal sessions". (The ASTD e-learning handbook companion website – Blended learning)

Singh (2003) points out that blended learning combines multiple delivery media that are designed to complement each other and promote learning. Singh refers to a "first generation of e-learning" which was completely dependent on web-based delivery mechanisms, and notes that "a single mode of delivery may not provide sufficient

choices, engagement, social contact, relevance and context" to learners. He refers to a "second wave of e-learning" in which designers are now experimenting with blended learning models. This second wave of e-learning takes greater cognizance of differences and diversity in learning styles; there is recognition of the fact that no one has one style of learning. In addition to offering more choices, according to Singh, blended learning is more effective.

This paper describes the introduction of current technology to the existing learning strategies at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in two distance education programmes, and examines the way forward as a result of the experience of the past year. From the inception of distance teaching at the UWI, the institution has utilised blended learning strategies, although the term was not used to describe what had been instituted as this was not then part of the jargon of the field of distance learning. The strategies have consisted of printed materials, audioconferencing, face-to-face tutorials and teletutorials in support of the delivery of the institution's offerings through its Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC). Increases in student intake and increased course offerings have resulted in the saturation of the teleconferencing capabilities, and this has hastened the inclusion of current technologies in the delivery mix.

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES: ITS CONTEXT

The University of the West Indies, established in 1948, is a regional institution which serves sixteen countries in the English-speaking Caribbean: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St Christopher (Kitts) & Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Turks & Caicos Islands (see figure 1). With campuses in three countries, Barbados (Cave Hill Campus), Jamaica (Mona Campus), and Trinidad & Tobago (St Augustine Campus), it is supported by contributions from the governments of the countries it serves.

The countries served by the UWI have a common history of slavery and colonialism which have impacted its educational system. The majority of the people of these islands are of African origin, with East Indians, Chinese, and Lebanese being among other racial and ethnic groupings in the region. During the period of slavery and after its abolition, which was followed by the emancipation of the enslaved people, minimum provision was made for the education of the people. It was not until the later years of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century that formal education became widely accessible to the majority of the people of the English-speaking countries of the region. As a result of the delay in formalising education in the region, oral means of

knowledge transfer have had a significant influence on the learning style of the people. Additionally, traditional pedagogical approaches remain entrenched in the educational systems of the region and learners have a difficulty adapting to and accepting andragogical approaches to learning. According to Osoba (2000, p. 55) "... students tend to be passive recipients of knowledge and skills imparted to them by someone considered more expert than they. Thus, there is generally an overwhelming need for a teacher; there is little emphasis on self-learning."

In addition to the socio-cultural factors that influence education, geography, topography and size also play a part. These factors affect access to campus facilities and tertiary level education generally. Another consideration is the uneven and limited distribution of technology in the countries of the region, which means that where technology is required, it is low-end educational technology that is given priority consideration as this is what is most widely available. In the more economically advanced islands, higher-end technology is more easily accessible.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UWI

Distance education at the UWI formally began in 1983, using an audio-teleconferencing system that was known as the UWI Distance Teaching Experiment, UWIDITE (UWIDEC 1999). In 1996, an amalgamation of the various distance related initiatives at the University resulted in the establishment of The University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC). Headquartered in Barbados, UWIDEC "is responsible for facilitating the planning, preparation and implementation of distance education programmes and services offered by UWI" (UWIDEC 1999, p. 11). UWIDEC has 31 centres across the region in the 16 countries where the University is represented. In some countries there is more than one centre; in Jamaica, for example, there are ten centres while in Trinidad there are five centres. These centres provide teleconferencing, tutorial, and computer lab facilities, as many potential students would be unable to avail themselves of tertiary-level education if these facilities were not available.

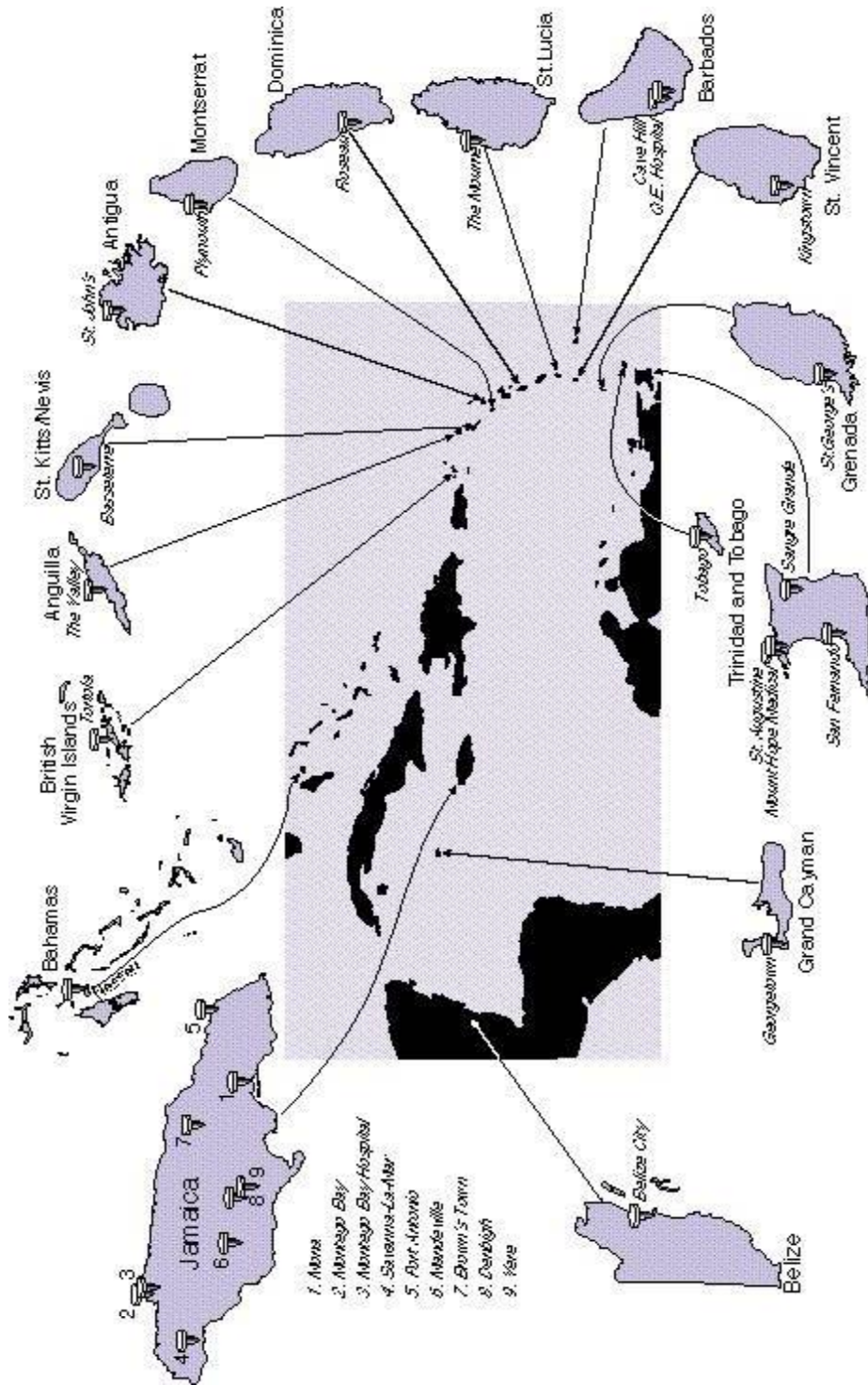


Figure 1: Map showing the countries served by the UWI and UWIDEC sites

The delivery modalities chosen by UWIDEC have taken into consideration the learning experiences of the people of the region while adhering to the principles of adult learning. In carrying out its charge to widen access to the range of offerings of the UWI, UWIDEC “uses a variety of distance education methodologies: self-study texts supplemented by tutorial [support] via the audio-teleconferencing system and/or local face-to-face tutors” (p. 11). More recently, e-mail has been used to supplement or provide tutorial support, and UWIDEC has also been using online learning systems to supplement the existing methodologies and enhance course delivery.

Courses are delivered at UWIDEC in several ways: (1) Print materials (sometimes called ‘study guides’) written by content experts drawn from the relevant faculty of the University and prepared and coordinated by UWIDEC’s materials production staff, provide the essential course content. To date, it has been a faculty-driven model that has obtained. (2) Audioconferencing via UWI’s telecommunication network provides a classroom where interaction between course coordinators or tutors and learners takes place. Tutorial support may also be provided via the teleconferencing system. (3) Audiographic capability enhances teleconferencing, allowing course coordinators to write or draw. (4) Tutorial support, either via email, teleconferencing, or face-to-face, provides the requisite one-to-one interaction that is intended to “promote independent learning and to individualise courses for each distance learner.” (UWIDEC 1999, p. 14). (5) Computer-based learning support provides additional flexibility and interactivity for some programmes.

COMPUTER –BASED LEARNING SUPPORT: TWO PROGRAMMES

Certificate in Gender Studies

The Certificate in Gender Studies commenced in January 2003. The programme seeks to develop in participants “an understanding of gender and its influence in all spheres of life – social, economic, political, and personal – and therefore, its impact on national development” (Certificate in Gender and Development Studies brochure). This programme can be offered in all the countries which are part of the UWI. At present, participants are drawn from ten countries.

The programme makes use of teleconferencing, face-to-face tutorials, the Internet (e-mail) and multimedia packages that include print materials. Interaction is provided by tutors via teletutorial sessions. This facilitates raising questions and clarifying issues which may have arisen from reading the print materials.

The decision to use e-mail as the only computer-based mode of interaction in this programme was based on the knowledge of the uneven distribution of technology across the countries involved as well as the knowledge that the learners would be dependent on the UWIDEC centre for access to computers as personal computer penetration and, even more so, Internet penetration, is low.

The B. Ed Secondary (Distance) Programme

This programme was developed at the request of the Ministry of Education, Jamaica as a strategy for upgrading the content knowledge and teaching skills of teachers in recently-upgraded secondary schools in Jamaica. The target set by the Ministry was to upgrade 3000 teachers over ten years. This was considered critical to the country's development. The programme had to achieve its objective without disrupting the teaching schedule of the secondary schools. As a result, the limited available teleconferencing time slots were even less effective due to the inability of the teachers to get to the UWIDEC centres at the times available. A wider range of delivery methods is used in this programme: print materials form the backbone of most of the courses in the programme, accompanied by face-to-face tutorials, teleconferencing, intra-mural classes, and computer-based interactive sessions. In addition, there are courses which are not offered in the distance mode.

The circumstances of the programme dictated that the delivery modes meet the following criteria. They should:

1. Provide the teachers with an alternative interaction mode to teleconferencing
2. Take place asynchronously in as far as this was possible
3. Incur minimal additional costs due to budget restrictions
4. Be simple to administer and use

Assessing the New Technologies Available

UWIDEC had already been exploring alternative computer-based modes of delivery. There was reasonable training/exposure to learning management systems in the form of WebCT and to a lesser extent Virtual U. There was training and testing being done in CD courseware (JITL) and the UWI Campus had recently implemented its web portal facilities for students and staff (Campus Pipeline). Table 1 illustrates the capabilities/facilities offered by the technologies explored.

	Capabilities	Advantages	Disadvantages
JITL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive media content on CD • Utilize links to additional content • (web links) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not require Internet Access • Content is portable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content is limited by the capacity of the CD • Lengthy development & production cycle • Lack dynamic content • Lack of social interaction
WebCT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive media content (Web) • Utilize links to additional content • (web links) • Email facilities • Message board facilities • Chat facilities • Online Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive learning environment • Supported by Campus IT Unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely Expensive • Requires the students and tutors to have Internet access • Hosting hardware requirements are extreme
Virtual U	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize links to additional content • (web links) • Message board facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple Interface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited capabilities • Requires internet access • Required hardware acquisition
CampusPipeline portal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive media content (Web) • Utilize links to additional content • (web links) • Email facilities • Message board facilities • Chat facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported by Campus IT Unit • Feature rich 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires Internet access

Table 1: Assessment of the Technologies Explored

JITL was eliminated due to the lengthy production and development cycle and the lack of social interaction, which made it an unsuitable replacement for teleconferences, especially given the learning experiences and needs of our average student. WebCT and Virtual U were eliminated because of the costs involved in user licenses (in the case of WebCT) and hardware expenditure (in the case of Virtual U). Campus Pipeline, which was already in use on the Mona Campus and already providing e-mail facilities for all students as well as chat facilities for synchronous discussion as well as message board facilities for asynchronous discussions, was the most viable choice.

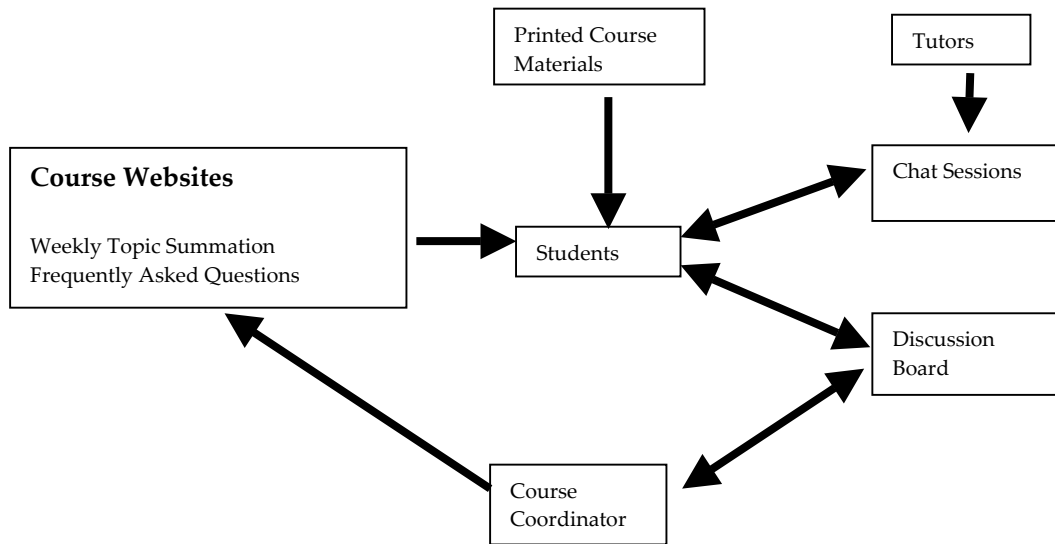


Figure 2: *The Accepted Model (B.Ed Secondary programme)*

As outlined in the model, learners would receive their printed course materials which would include a syllabus and weekly objectives. It was expected that they would work on the material as outlined in the objectives and post any questions to discussion boards for clarification by the tutor or course coordinator. Tutors were assigned a maximum of 15 students each. Tutors would schedule chat sessions throughout the semester to provide learners with some synchronous interaction. At the end of each week, it would be the duty of the tutor to summarise the weekly activities and publish the summaries on the individual course sites.

Our Experience: One Year Later

Our experience has reinforced some of our previously held views and in addition has highlighted the vulnerable spots to focus on for the next offerings. These vulnerabilities fall into three categories: technology, administration, the human element (students and tutors).

Technology: The selected learning management system, Campus Pipeline, while being simple to use, has proven to be limiting. For example, Campus Pipeline has a textual limitation in its message board facilities that caused complications with the tutors. Each message can be no longer than 200 words. In addition, the nature of UWIDEC's network interface with the UWI Mona Campus prohibited the use of the chat facilities at the UWIDEC Jamaica centres, located off the Mona Campus. In spite of the fact that access to a personal computers and the Internet was an entry requirement, a large number of students were solely dependent on the UWIDEC lab facilities for access.

Administration: The administrative problems related to the fact that both programmes commence in what would normally be the second semester of the academic year at UWI. The current registration system requires that students register in the first semester of the academic year. Initially, this resulted in students being denied access to the Campus Pipeline system.

The human element: The majority of the problems faced related to the learning habits of the individuals involved in the programme. For instance, at the outset, both students and tutors paid little attention to the instruction manuals with which they were all provided. This resulted in them not being able to execute their responsibilities in a timely manner. Although basic computer literacy was a criterion for entry to the B.Ed. Secondary programme, many participants were very reluctant to use the computer facilities. There were also tutors who refused to use the computer-based delivery medium and instead used teleconferencing for the duration of their course. In the case of the Certificate in Gender Studies, which required communication through e-mail, very little exchange took place. The Programme Coordinator undertook visits to some of the sites to conduct demonstrations and give practice to participants in an effort to improve their skills in specific areas: to facilitate communication, delivery of assignments, and preparation of final research reports.

THE FUTURE

Valuable lessons have been learnt over the past year. As Rossett and associates (2003) indicate, the participants are an important part of making the strategy work. The main lessons relate to ensuring that all the participants are aware of the importance of following the instructions provided. It is also important to ensure that the participants have the necessary computer-based skills. To this end, the relevant parties will have to ensure that more in-depth training sessions are put in place to maximise the benefits of blended learning strategies.

Rossett and associates (2003) offer some advice on what it takes to blend successfully. Among the points made are:

- Work cross-functionally. This ensures that all participants in the process understand their roles and the reasons for multifaceted approaches.
- Encourage independence and conviviality.

- Put people in the middle of the blend. Instructors should act as catalysts in online communities, ensuring a fit among people, experiences and assets.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.

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